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In Taboo, Kim Scott revisits Australia's history of conflict.

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<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/in-taboo-kim-scott-revisits-australias-history-of-conflict/news-story/4a7dba540b1399866fc4dfeedc55710b>



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In Taboo, Kim Scott revisits Australia's history of conflict.

These days the release of a new Kim Scott novel feels like a literary event. It wasn't always this way. His first two books, *True Country* (1993) and *Benang* (1999), established him more as a writer's writer: a brilliant, if raw, voice calling to us from across the Nullarbor. But with his previous book, the gobsmacking *That Deadman Dance* (2010), Scott announced himself as the country's most important novelist.

It was a book that took a fresh look at Australia's past. We had the typical scenes of first contact as white settlers arrived in Albany and began to alienate Aboriginal land, yet in Scott's telling this didn't devolve into violence.

The relationship between settlers and the local Noongar is much more akin to an exchange than a rivalry and the violence is forestalled by a mutual desire to understand.

Scott has twice won the Miles Franklin Literary Award, first for *Benang* and then for *That Deadman Dance*. With his desire to move beyond the polemics of postcolonial history, and the generosity of his outlook, he has enlarged the possibilities of the Australian novel. So it is with great interest that I approached his new book, *Taboo*.

The good news is Scott is in as fine a form as ever. This is a pacy, smart book with a surprising sense of forward momentum. Momentum hasn't always been Scott's priority, given the joy he finds in digressions of all kinds, but the narrative in *Taboo* is constantly building towards something. Tragedy? Epiphany? I won't spoil the story, but there is a good deal of pleasure to be had in watching this intricate plot unfold as you wait to find out where it will take you.

The story starts with Dan Horton, an old farmer in the West Australian town of Kepalup. His property takes in a 19th century Aboriginal massacre site. A reconciliation-themed Peace Park is soon to be opened in Kepalup and when Dan learns the Noongar delegation in town for the grand opening wants to visit his property, he is equal parts excited and worried.

He isn't comfortable with the idea that frontier conflict took place on his land, given the implications it has for the present day. But he is sympathetic to the needs of the Aboriginal community and understands their connection to country, a connection he feels as well. So he invites some of the Noongar on to his property to let them visit the taboo site.

This is the moment when we meet the key Aboriginal characters: the twin brothers Gerrard and Gerald and the teenager Tilly. The two Gerrys in particular have a terrific sense of mischief and fun about them. They are men with a deep knowledge of language and culture but it's something they wear lightly. For them being a Noongar man means being generous with what you know and sharing what you have. That's where Tilly comes into the story. She's hoping to learn more about her heritage after discovering that her late father, Jim Coolman, was Aboriginal. The Gerrys are keen to help Tilly find a new sense of family among the Noongar community.

In this basic set-up, we can see the familiar themes of Scott's work starting to emerge. The urge of writers working in this area is to dwell on the scars left behind first by the early conflicts and then by the racist policies that followed. Scott is not immune to that urge, but as we know he is less interested in the finger-pointing polemic. Mostly, he wants to write about healing, forgiving and getting on with life. These are the predominant feelings in the first chapters where Horton and the two Gerrys explain the history of the area for Tilly.

There is a good deal of warmth in these scenes where the men bond over their shared love of the land and its rich history. The sadness is still there, as it must be, but the push is always towards listening to each other and learning. It's hard not to be moved by this. Rarely has the spirit of reconciliation been so beautifully captured in fiction. Scott's special gift as a writer is his nose for the human side of the politics around Australia's colonial past.

Still, that past has left a mark on our characters. It soon emerges that Tilly hasn't had an easy life. Her mother and father have both died and she suffers continual flashbacks to a horrifying experience that left her with trauma. It starts with memories of being chained up and kept in a yard, sleeping among the dogs.

These memories come at certain moments in the early chapters as emotional punctuation around the rather more jovial business of the Peace Park celebration. We can feel the past beginning to encroach on the present.

Tilly also has some issues trusting the twin Gerrys — or at least Gerrard — to keep their hands to themselves. It isn't long before we learn that she has been the victim of a serious sexual assault.

The way Scott handles Tilly's traumatic past is perhaps the weakest element of the novel, though. It's soon revealed that the man who assaulted her was Doug, the son of Dan Horton. The question of why this assault occurred gives the narrative a lot of its momentum around the middle section of the book and ties together many of the strands of the story around Tilly's father, the Gerrys and the Noongar community at large.

Nevertheless, the image of Tilly chained around the neck and left naked among Doug's pack of security dogs is an uncomfortable one. It's an image with a notable history in the representations of Aboriginality. It calls to mind Smasher and his Aboriginal slave girl in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*. It calls to mind the chained, howling men in John Hillcoat's film *The Proposition*. As an organising metaphor, I don't think it has the revelatory power that Scott hopes. Rather, it renders Doug down to cardboard-villain status and undermines the salient point the novel wants to make about white black relations.

While *Taboo* does deal with the heavy ideas of intergenerational trauma and Aboriginal identity, it often tries to do so with a dose of humour. This remarkably good-natured book draws much of its strength from its depictions of the bonds between the Noongar characters.

There is one brilliant scene towards the end where Kathy, the delegation's senior cook, complains about how damper is somehow considered real blackfella food nowadays, along with hamburgers and doughnuts. But when she lets everyone know that it will be lizard stew for dinner, their horror is clear.

Scott approaches these small moments with a loving hand and an eye for humour. That's when the book is at its best.

All in all, *Taboo* represents Scott's most approachable work of fiction yet. While it acknowledges the crimes of the past, it leaves us full of a sense of hope for the future. The project of renewal that Kim Scott has put his weight behind is both the subject matter here but also the outcome. He's that rare writer who walks what he talks.

Taboo

By Kim Scott

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Rohan Wilson is author of the novels The Roving Part and To Name Those Lost.